

Dark Valleys

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Psalm 23 (NRSV)

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Most of you know, I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh. Actually, we had a Pittsburgh zip code which always confused me and still does. But if you know anything at all about that part of Pennsylvania – actually any part of Pennsylvania – you know that mountains and the valleys between them are just part of life. Honestly, growing up I just didn't notice that the house where I lived was on a steep brick street, that got even steeper around the corner. Then as I got older, I just assumed that part of getting your driver's license everywhere was knowing how to come to a stop at a stop sign part way up a steep street and then move forward using both the brake and the gas pedal at the same time. The first time I realized just how unusual my Pittsburgh driver training and experience was occurred when I was at a UCC Educators Conference in San Francisco and I ended up being the designated driver for our sight-seeing trips because I was the only one who wasn't terrified of driving, and parallel parking on the hills. By the way, the steepest street in the United States is not in San Francisco. Nope. It's Canton Avenue in the Beechwood neighborhood of Pittsburgh. It has a 37% grade meaning that for every 100 feet of horizontal travel the elevation rises by 37 feet. I used to go shopping in Beechwood and I think one of my brother's girlfriends lived there. Steep streets around here??? Please...

Mountains and valleys have always been part of my life. So, the 23rd Psalm has always been very easy for me to visualize, to connect with the message it conveys. In fact, when I read this psalm or hear it read, the scene it creates in my mind and heart is

the hillsides and valleys of Pennsylvania. The still waters are the roadside creeks that run everywhere at the base of the mountains. Of course, it is more than a little disconcerting when those still waters are close to a mine or a gravel pit and the water is a very weird color. But that was just part of the Pennsylvania I grew up with. All is much cleaner now and those creeks (“cricks” as they are called in PA) are simply lovely. I will say that in most of the parts of Pennsylvania I know, you are more likely to see cattle – dairy and beef – than you are sheep. But still the relatability of the Psalm 23 metaphors are powerful for me, as they are for everyone who hears this most beautiful and beloved Psalm.

Truthfully, I don’t think the draw, the connection so many of us feel to God through this psalm has much to do with its bucolic nature. After all, most of us live in cities and urban areas, or close enough to them that these bucolic scenes are not usually part of every day life. What is part of every day life though is the universal human experience captured so powerfully in verse 4. This is also the verse which reveals the vast differences in how this psalm is translated in various versions of the Bible. The *New Revised Standard Version* which is the translation in the Worship Resource this morning and is our Pew Bible, translates verse 4a as “*even though as I walk through the darkest valley... .*” But note how differently this verse appears in the *King James Bible*: “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*” That’s quite a shift when you look at them side by side. One speaks of darkness while another speaks of death.

Still other translations vary even more. In the *New English Translation*, verse 4a reads “*Even though I must walk through the darkest valley....*” The addition of that modifier “must” does something to the whole sentence, doesn’t it. It creates a whole new sense of the ominous place we’ve been forced into. Still more

nuance can be seen in the *Living Bible*, which is actually not a translation but a paraphrase. This is a key difference because a paraphrase begins not with the original language the text was written in but instead a version of the text already translated which is then rewritten in more readable form. Published in 1971, the *Living Bible* was an attempt to put the wording of the original *Revised Standard Bible* into a more relatable English language format. In this version, then, verse 4a reads: “*Even when walking through the dark valley of death...*” So, this verse captures both the foreboding of darkness and the fearsomeness of death. Still intense!

Then at last we come to yet another paraphrase, one which is much beloved and contemporary to the 21st century. This of course is *The Message*. Written by Eugene Peterson and considered a book and not a Bible by most online retailers, *The Message* is literally one man’s attempt to rewrite the entire Bible in language HE thought would be easier for average folks to read. So, this is quite literally what ONE person – Eugene Peterson – thinks this Psalm is trying to say in verse 4 (although he doesn’t have verse numbers, which makes comparing it with traditional translations more difficult – but I digress). He writes this verse 4a as, “*Even when the way goes through Death Valley.*” Okay, that is a very Americanized way of translating this text using as a descriptor a physical geographic location specific to the United States. Thus, the universality of this text is muddied if not lost completely. Perhaps you can tell, I am not a fan of *The Message*.

Okay, then. Why am I having us spend so much time on this one section of one verse in this 6 verse psalm? That’s simple. Because that’s where the real power, the real meaning of the psalm resides. In these few words at the beginning of verse 4 we see why this particular psalm among 150 other psalms draws us to

it so powerfully. This psalm dares to confront the reality of death for every single person, wrapped in words of hope and comfort. The Psalmist doesn't begin with death or "dark shadows." No, he begins with a reminder of God's love for each of us – like a shepherd caring for his sheep. And this caring requires love and care and nurture in order for the sheep to do more than just survive the harsh conditions. This shepherd offers the sheep love that knows no bounds. This shepherd offers tranquility in green pastures and still waters, so that the sheep can find renewal in the midst of a sometimes harsh existence amid scrub grasses and scarce water sources. Even better, this shepherd provides guidance on what paths through life are good and safe to follow because each and every sheep matters. Each and every sheep deserves a good and full life, lived in the midst of peace and tranquility and justice. Wonderful! Powerful. So powerful that even when danger comes, what verse 4a is trying to describe, – an existential danger to every sheep; even then the sheep can feel safe in the dark valley. Comfort, love and protection surround the sheep even then when shadows and the threat of death are tangible. Even then, the sheep in the shepherd's care can know – not just feel but KNOW – they are safe and secure ... and loved.

Echoing the opening verses of Psalm 23, the remaining two verses after this acceptance that life does bring us into dark and scary places, continue the description of all the ways in which the shepherd shows deep love and concern for each sheep. They are fed at an abundant table even as enemies look on. They are anointed with healing oil to soothe previous injuries. In all these ways, then, they can be assured that they will enjoy life to the fullest, in spite of everything there is to be afraid of, in spite of how ever many dark valleys there are to traverse, how many moments will come when death feels too close – our own death or

of someone we love deeply. No matter what, the shepherd never abandons the sheep. No matter what, God never abandons us, never losing sight of us even when the shadows around us are thick and ominous.

Dear Ones, this 23rd Psalm is so beloved precisely because it dares to confront all of our fears, all those dark valleys where we struggle to see a way forward, all those moments when death feels too close. This is why this Psalm occupies a significant space in virtually every memorial or funeral service. In those moments when we are confronting painful and personal loss, we need this psalm's vivid reminder that God is right beside us even then. Especially then. God is with us through every one of those moments because God is with us through every moment in our lives. Yes, there are dark valleys in our lives because they exist in every human life. I think it's realistic to say we are in one of those moments right now as a nation. Every morning the news gets darker, the sense of the ominous grows deeper, the overwhelming desire to return to happier, safer times washes over us. And yet, here we still are, right in the middle of a deep valley ensconced in shadows when we desperately crave sunlight and hope and joy once more.

So, the question for us this morning is not when will we finally leave the dark valley behind. It is instead how does this beautiful psalm still speak to us as we feel stuck in this valley. We look again to those first verses:

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
God makes me lie down in green pastures;
God leads me beside still waters;
God restores my soul.
God leads me in right paths for his name's sake."*

It would seem then that we are to trust in God as the abiding presence of love and comfort in our lives. We are to make the time to set aside our worries and our tasks and do things that restore our souls – take a walk, find a quiet spot in nature to rest a bit and listen to the sounds of the cosmos all around. Create the space within yourself for God to restore your soul! God will never force his way into your life. You need to make the space for God’s presence to come into your very being and when you do, God’s love will seep into every part of you and you will be restored. You will then find the courage and the strength to continue down the path God places before you each day, even the ones through dark valleys.

All that remains then is for you to let the Shepherd indeed be yours, every day and every night. All that remains is for you to let go of all that stuff that often feels too heavy, too painful, too difficult to deal with. Let go. Put it down. Then reach for the light and hope the Shepherd is offering you and hold on to that with all your might. Dear ones, the choice is yours, every moment of every day. Amen.